

Review of Data Quality

Aylesbury Vale District Council

Audit 2007/08

November 2008

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Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
 - any third party.
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Summary of findings

- 1 The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings to date from our work on data quality for 2007/08.
- 2 Auditors' work on data quality and performance information supports the Commission's reliance on performance indicators (PIs) in its service assessments for comprehensive performance assessment (CPA).
- 3 Our work on data quality is complemented by the Audit Commission's paper, 'Improving information to support decision making: standards for better quality data'. This paper sets out standards, for adoption on a voluntary basis, to support improvement in data quality. The expected impact of the Audit Commission's work on data quality is that it will drive improvement in the quality of local government performance information, leading to greater confidence in the supporting data on which performance assessments are based.

Scope of our work

- 4 We have followed the Audit Commission's three-stage approach to the review of data quality as set out in Table 1.

Table 1 **Data quality approach**

Stage 1	Management arrangements A review using key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to determine whether proper corporate management arrangements for data quality are in place, and whether these are being applied in practice. The findings contribute to the auditor's conclusion under the Code of Audit Practice on the Council's arrangements to secure value for money (the VFM conclusion).
Stage 2	Analytical review An analytical review of 2007/08 Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) and non-BVPI data and selection of a sample for testing based on risk assessment.
Stage 3	Data quality spot checks In-depth review of a sample of 2007/08 PIs which come from a list of specified BVPI and non-BVPIs used in CPA to determine whether arrangements to secure data quality are delivering accurate, timely and accessible information in practice. For 2007/08 PI spot checks, the Audit Commission specified that it is compulsory to review two housing benefits PIs at all single tier and district councils as a minimum.

- 5 As this is the third year of applying this approach to data quality, we tailored our work to focus on the key changes and actions taken to address previously identified weaknesses and recommendations.
- 6 Our work on specified indicators at stage 3 focused on the two housing benefits PIs only as we had assessed overall arrangements as low risk. Also, there were no areas arising from our work on data quality in 2006/07 that required us to carry out work on specific PIs.

Summary conclusions

Stage 1 – Management arrangements

- 7 The Council's overall management arrangements for ensuring data quality are consistently above minimum requirements. Therefore, we were only required to look at the two Housing Benefit BVPIs at stages 2 and 3 of our work. This assessment did not change in the light of the re-review of these arrangements in the light of the findings from the Stage 3 data quality spot checks.

Stage 2 – Analytical review

- 8 Our analytical review work at Stage 2 identified that the only PI that fell outside of the expected range was one of the two Housing Benefit BVPIs and so was covered by our review in detail at Stage 3.

Stage 3 – Data quality spot checks

- 9 Our review and spot checks of PIs focused on the two Housing Benefit BVPIs only. It identified the following:
 - BVPI 78a - Average time taken to process new claims (housing benefit and council tax benefit) - was not fairly stated. There was a systemic error in the calculation of the start date for new claims, particularly with telephone claims. This meant an amendment of >10% of the reported value. However, this error is one that officers are confident has been addressed for 2008/09 through a change in the regulations and through staff training. We have since been contacted by the Head of Benefits querying the nature and classification of a teleclaim - which could impact on our assessment - and will attempt to resolve this as well as the issues around BVPI78a also;
 - Our initial spot check on BVPI 78b - Average time taken to process change of circumstance - concluded that this was not fairly stated. This was because there were three cases where there was an error in the calculation of the start date (where the start date was incorrect by around one month). Although only a small number of errors, when the effect of these errors was extrapolated, it meant an amendment >10% of the reported value.
Council officers disputed the findings on the grounds that the specific errors identified were not representative of the overall performance of the Council. Therefore, we secured a specific extension from the Audit Commission to allow the Council to increase the sample size of cases covered. As the deadline for completing this work is November 21 2008, and the deadline for submission of this

Summary of findings

report is November 18 2008, we will present a verbal update on the results of the additional testing, and the overall result of this spot check, at the Audit Committee on 8 December 2008.

- 10 It should be noted however, that while there has been an impact on the performance indicator, our work has not identified any issues around either the amounts paid to benefit claimants or monies claimed from central government. Also, there were no issues arising from this work that indicated that the wider systems and processes were not 'fit for purpose' or that the errors were in any way due to manipulation of data. Officers are confident the issues surrounding the errors identified have been addressed for 2008/09 through a change in the benefit regulations and through staff training.
- 11 A final report with an action plan agreed by officers will be brought to the next Audit Committee.

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